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Early pheasant opener possible in 2002

RON WILSON, Bismarck Tribune

Like the coming pheasant hatch -- a tricky event influenced one way or another by the weather -- there are some unknowns about the ring-necked opener two seasons down the road.

A state wildlife official said there is some talk about surrendering a near decade-long trend and opening the 2002 North Dakota pheasant season the first weekend in October.

"What we are considering is not carved in stone by any means," said Dean Hildebrand, director of the state Game and Fish Department, of a possible move that would open the popular upland game bird season a week earlier than typical in 2002.

Since 1990, the state's pheasant season has opened the second weekend in October.

The thinking, Hildebrand said, is an earlier opener would give hunters a greater chance to be outdoors in nicer weather. And, in the end, it would also add a week to the season's length.

"Some people are saying that the only reason you are pushing for this is because the guides and outfitters are pushing for this," he said.

Yet, the department director said that is not the case.

"It needs to be clear that the intention is to try to give the hunter, particularly the North Dakota hunter,

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another week in the field when the weather is decent," Hildebrand said.

Of course, an early opener and a week-longer season, would be a financial plus to those who typically benefit from money spent during the pheasant season.

"We would not do this for economic reasons \$ but it would be good economically because you would be adding a week to the pheasant season," Hildebrand said.

Opening the season a week early, Hildebrand said, "should not be a biological issue to a large extent." Still, some will criticize the move because not all of the young ring-necked roosters will be dressed fully in their gaudy colors, enabling hunters to easily distinguish the males from the protected females.

"But if you can't identify them, don't shoot them," Hildebrand said.

Dan Hare, regional wildlife biologist with Pheasants Forever in Bismarck, said that whatever the department decides about opening a week earlier in 2002 or not, the decision must be driven by science and not by money.

"We need to be aware of that," he said.

Hare said he can see the benefits from getting a jump on the state's typical pheasant opener, but added that there are still other birds to hunt even if no changes are made.

"Our sharptail (grouse) season opens (in September) and that provides people who like to hunt upland birds to be out during that nicer time of the year," he said.

Hildebrand said the idea of switching the season-opening dates was aired at department advisory board meetings held around the state this spring.

"There was a general feeling from hunters that this might not be a bad idea," he said.

There are some questions to be answered, however, before a decision is made. One has to do with landowner tolerance, Hildebrand said.

"Some landowners say hunters are in the field too much already," he said.

More analysis will follow, Hildebrand promised.

"We are going to look into all the positives and negatives," he said. "This isn't a slam dunk, yet."

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